

Wisconsin Film Festival: Festival Scouting How To's

Updated June 8, 2005

1) Background:

a) What Do We (WFF) Program?

- In general:

Independent film (US): films that would be distributed by specialty or art-house distributors (check print sources of past Festival programs). Other films are not yet in distribution and are obtained from film productions companies, individual filmmakers, or sales agents. Here are examples of distributors we have worked with:

Artisan
California Newsreel
First Run Feature, First Run/Icarus
Fox Searchlight
IDP/Goldwyn
IFC Films
Koch Lorber Films
Kino International
Lions Gate
Magnolia Pictures
New Yorker Films
Newmarket Films
Palm Pictures
Seventh Art Releasing
Sony Pictures Classics [unlikely]
Strand Releasing
Tartan Films
TLA Releasing
THINKFilm
Warner Independent
Wellspring
Zeitgeist

World cinema

Work by Wisconsin-connected filmmakers and students (usually about 20% of programming, most comes from submissions)

Feature films, documentary, experimental, shorts (animated, narrative, documentary), new media, "midnight movies" (arty martial arts, horror, camp)

- By the numbers (in general)

150 films from 25+ countries (About 30 – 40% non-US cinema)

45 - 50 films from Wisconsin's Own & Student competitions

Mix of about 30% fictional feature films, 20% - 30% documentary features, 30 - 40% shorts (fiction, documentary, animated, 55-60), 10% experimental / new media (15). WFF Films are organized into Annual (general) and Special (highlighted) series.

Annual:

American Cinema: Narrative features and shorts from the United States.

Contemporary World Cinema: Narrative features and shorts from outside the US

Documentary: Documentary features and shorts from the US and around the world.

Experimental / New Media: Experimental, avant garde film, new media, and multimedia

Restorations and revivals: Archival prints, restorations and special re-releases.

Special:

Spotlight: A focus on the work of one film artist

Insider (films + talks): About filmmaking in some way

After Dark: Late night movies on the edge and over the top

Wisconsin's Own: Films by Wisconsin's own filmmakers, including features, documentaries, shorts, experimental and new media.

Other series built around regional or national cinema, theme, subject, or genre.

b) What is a "Wisconsin Film Festival" film?

New. Made within the last two years. Must be at least a Madison premiere. Wisconsin, Midwest or US premiere better. Not commercially available on video.

Typically specialty, art-house, festival-circuit.

Quality. Has some sort of buzz, significance. Has won awards at significant film festivals (Toronto, Cannes, Sundance, Slamdance, Telluride, Vancouver, Venice, Berlin, Rotterdam, New York Film Festival, Hamptons, New Directors New Films at Lincoln Center, SXSW, shown at Film Forum).

Films from hot emerging filmmakers great. Also, diversity, underrepresented voices.

Film that has Wisconsin connection somehow deserves a special look.

Films from independent distributors that will be released in spring, for which WFF screening fits into their marketing plan.

Films that have connection to or build synergy with other programming.

FOR PLAY CIRCLE—films by first time, young directors, have been of interest.

c) What's not a Festival film:

For the most part, large-budget mainstream films from Disney, Warner Bros., etc.

Films older than two years old; films widely available on video.

Films that will have completed their theatrical run by early April (i.e., most of the Gala Premieres or Special Presentations at Toronto).

Films that have only gotten into marginal festivals, esp. the "New York Independent Film Festival," Phoenix Film Festival, etc.

Any film that someone wants to push on you.

d) What's realistic for WFF?

We are a regional festival and not a market or major festival with national / international presence. We are part of the marketing strategy for a distributor AFTER the film is picked up for distribution. We are in a small market (250,000) which frankly is not a strong independent theatrical market. We are highly unlikely to receive a US or world premiere of any film (though it's possible). Our goal is Midwest or Wisconsin premieres of films from other major festivals.

e) Desirable yet unlikely films for us are:

- Almost "major" indie films with lots of stars
- Higher profile films without US distribution.
- Features that premiere at Sundance (timing wrong, too early)
- Films from Sony Pictures Classics or other "major specialty houses."

2) Scouting

Identify films in Festival schedule ahead of time that fit our parameters and look unlikely to be released in fall or early winter. Many Toronto "Gala," "Special Presentation," "Masters" films are not programming materials for us due to release schedule, but not always.

Toronto Programs to concentrate on:

Contemporary World Cinema
Visions
Discovery
Reel to Reel
Planet Africa
Director's Spotlight

Look for directors we know, look at Indiewire, etc., to see what has buzz.

Where to look to find "buzz:" Indiewire's special Toronto section:
<http://www.indiewire.com/toronto/>

Search web to see what's showing / won awards at:

Cannes Film Festival <http://www.festival-cannes.fr/index.php?langue=6002>
Rotterdam <http://www.filmfestivalrotterdam.com/en/index.html>
Locarno <http://2004.pardo.ch/evento/>
Edinburgh Film Festival <http://www.edfilmfest.org.uk/>

Keep tabs on what will be programmed in other key fall festivals:

Venice <http://www.labiennale.org/en/cinema/>
New York <http://www.filmlinc.com/nyff/nyff.htm>
Telluride (<http://www.telluridefilmfestival.com/>)
Vancouver <http://www.viff.org/>

Pick films, but also leave a few options open. Listen to buzz while you are at the Fest so you could switch over to a new film.

If a film is terrible, I leave so as not to waste my energy / attention. I stay, though, if I can sense it is a quality film or has had a lot of buzz, is from a director we know, even if I don't like it.

If you love a film, see if you can introduce yourself to a filmmaker, and get / give card. Let them know you "loved" film and are scouting for our Festival, but don't make any commitments or invitations. Ask if the film has distribution yet, what company, and if yes, who is "handling" it.

You are not going to get any commitments from filmmakers at Toronto or major fest because:

- a) Filmmakers are trying to sell their film to a distributor and are focused on that;
- b) Filmmakers themselves are often not authorized to make a Festival commitment; it's the distributor (or future distributor) that decides festival placements;
- c) The distributor will want to weigh all Festival opportunities after the distribution schedule is set.

What you want to do is make a contact so that you can then "follow up" (even tho. the filmmaker might not even remember you).

Things you want to take notes on for each film:

Distributor credit? (vs. sales agent, production co.)
Was it good? Did you like it? How did audience react?
Fit into our programming in any way?
Talk to filmmaker & whom?
Any Wisconsin connections?

Don't bother taking notes on content; it's already in the program, UNLESS content is radically different.

Always of Interest due to Festival Partnerships:

African films

Asian American films

European films: New Europe content: About young people, labor issues, immigration, cross cultural contexts, technology.

Films on Jewish or Israeli life, history or culture

Films about current issues / political hot spots: Middle East, North/South Korea, Central Asia

Films that have a book tie-in

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